

## POTENTIALS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH TRANSDANUBIAN REGION

### POTENCIJALI ZA RAZVOJ EKO-TURIZMA U PODRUČJU JUŽNOG ZADUNAVLJA

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#### Summary

*Outstanding natural features can be found throughout the whole area of the South Transdanubian region. These can serve as a good starting point for ecotourism developments. Nature reserves managed by the Danube-Drava National Park are appealing attractions even on an international level. The River Drava is listed among the three cleanest rivers in Europe, the geological and morphological features of the Mecsek Mountains are of remarkable value and Zselic won recognition among the attractions by having been awarded the title of »Starry Sky Reserve«. Tourism stakeholders look upon the ecotourism attractions of the region as a promising but yet unexploited potential. Besides natural assets, however, ecotourism developments are strongly affected by the attitude of locals and visitors to the region towards ecotourism and the professionalism of the ecotourism service providers and their willingness to cooperate.*

*Persent study –based on the results of empirical researches – presents cases that well demonstrate the basis, potentials and indicate the directions of ecotourism developments in the South Transdanubian region.*

**Key words:** South Transdanubian region, Potentials of ecotourism development, Danube-Drava National Park

**Ključne riječi:** Južno Zadunavlje, potencijali za razvoj ekoturizma, nacionalni park Dunav-Drava

#### PRINCIPLES AND FRAMEWORK OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENTS

Tourism is one of today's fastest growing industries which contributes to national income to a significant degree. In paralell, there is an increasing number of tourists choosing specific branches of tourism, among them many show growing interest in travelling to natural areas and visiting natural habitats. Although these trends are favourable for actors involved in ecotourism, conservation of natural resources should remain in focus as the primary concern of ecotouristic activities, since any harm done to the natural environment would lead to the loss of the appeal that attracts future ecotourists to the territory in question.

Consequently, ecotourism development poses a special challenge but also offers great opportunities for those managing natural values. Tourists should be attracted in a way that the

territories in question are not harmed so the growth expected by growth-oriented and utilitarian economic management is limited in favour of sustainable utilization.

A clarification is also needed concerning the notion of ecotourism since although it was first defined in the late 70's, early 80's a generally accepted definition still does not exist. The National Ecotourism Development Strategy (2008) proposes the use of the following definition on the basis of the wording given by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Natural Resources) Ecotourism Programme: *»environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations«* (National Ecotourism Development Strategy). We find it important to bear in mind the definitions given in the Québec Declaration according to which ecotourism is:

*»Every type of nature-based tourism in which the traveler's main goal is to observe and experience nature, and cultures relating to natural environment.*

- *Contains educational and interpretational elements.*
- *Ecotouristic tours are usually but not solely organized by highly specialized tour operators, typically for smaller groups. The tour operator has contacts with smaller local enterprises.*
- *Its participants aim to minimize negative effects on natural, social and cultural environment.*
- *Contributes to sustaining natural territories that represent attraction because:*
  - *it insures income for the community living in the natural environment, for the authorities and other organizations of the area that aim at environmental protection.*
  - *it insures job opportunities and income for the local community, enhances consciousness towards natural values.«* (Québec declaration 2002)

International trends show that ecotourism, natural values, activities in nature are becoming more and more popular and the desire to get acquainted with nature is continuously growing but the local population, due to insufficient communication, is not aware of the national ecotourism potentials (Hungarian Tourism Office 2007).

It is true that natural attractions mean significant attraction in themselves but without the necessary infrastructure they do not represent marketable products. Nature reserves rich in natural values usually coincide with undeveloped, disadvantaged areas since it is due to the undeveloped economic utilization (dry and sandy territory, saline area, karstic downhill, swampy land) that left them out of falling victim to intensive agriculture and this is why their natural values are still preserved. The fact that ecotourism and its development in these disadvantaged territories would be essential factors of developing the whole area do not need further explanations.

In terms of supply we can say that visitor-friendly products designed to meet needs and demands and made efficient by providing unique visitor experiences are not widespread. The supply side is represented by national parks, nature parks, public organisations and local authorities; they are the ones who make the major national basis of ecotourism work: visitor centres, exhibition rooms, forest schools, study paths and other institutions that help connect with nature. In spite of the growing number of enthusiastic and professionally prepared civil organisations that work efficiently in every field of ecotourism the dominance of national park managements is perceptible.

A paradoxon is visible from the above mentioned analysis according to which ecotourism – as opposed to other branches of tourism – must be and can be developed in a way that its presented values do not get harmed. This implies the setting of an upper limit on the number of visitors and consequently, limited revenues. Such barriers and the fact, that organisations having a share in ecotourism are usually established by civil initiatives and/or are poorly supported financially by local

governments – often lacking private capital – result in limited resources and minimal professional help allocated on marketing and related communication channels. Ecotourism enterprises are usually run by families, and members make it work as a part-time job, from their own power and sources. It can be ascertained that ecotourism service providers are in a difficult position; cooperation and professional interest representation are significant help for them.

## THE BASIS OF ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOUTH TRANSDANUBIAN REGION

### *2.1 Attitude of locals towards ecotourism: findings of an empirical research carried out in the Western Mecsek area*

In 2008 a representative population survey was conducted in the Western Mecsek microregion that embraces five villages (Cserkút, Kővágószőlős, Kővágótöttös, Bakonya és Boda). The goal was to examine the attitude of locals towards tourism and, based on the findings, to prepare a concrete ecotourism attraction- and product development project, titled Geo-Line (G. SZABÓ – A. AUBERT 2008).

Uranium mining launched in the 1950s reshaped the agricultural villages and the life of inhabitants in the Western Mecsek area. Stopping the mining activity caused significant natural, economic and social tension in the region. Rural tourism together with active- and ecotourism are key factors of economic takeoff in the examined villages (G. SZABÓ – P.SPIEGLER 2009a). The South Transdanubian region and Baranya County have an outstanding attraction; the examined villages belong to the area of Pécs and the Mecsek Hill that have a fully developed touristic brand (G. SZABÓ 2006). The Mecsek Mountains have diverse geological, botanical and zoological values. This motivates those involved in the development of tourism to turn to the development of different forms of soft tourism with special attention to the principles of sustainable development. The number of rural accommodations has slowly increased in the area during the last years and in 2010, when environmentally friendly ecolodges appeared in the South-Transdanubian region, first in Hungary, in villages connected to protected natural areas, 3 accommodations in Cserkút and 2 in Kővágószőlős received the title (G: SZABÓ – M. ENDRÉDI 2010). The complex ecotourism development project titled »Pearls of Mecsek: From the Jakab Hill to the Völgységi stream« that was implemented between the early spring of 2006 and late autumn of 2007 ([www.mecsekgyongyszemei.hu](http://www.mecsekgyongyszemei.hu)) positioned the villages in question as important scenes of ecotourism. In the period of the representative survey (2008) locals had already known about the project and this might have had an effect on their outstandingly positive attitude towards tourism.

The main tourist attractions of the Western Mecsek are its landscape and natural values. The examined villages are located in a landscape protection area and natural values of the land (geological, botanical...etc.) are protected. The Jakab Hill has been protected since 1978, and the Western Mecsek Landscape Protection Area was established in 2009 in a territory under the management of the Danube-Drava National Park. (<http://www.ddnp.hu/index.php?lang=en>). Respondents are mostly aware of natural values that surround them. For our question whether they can name some of these 21 different natural values were mentioned, among them most frequently forests (29%), the Jakab Hill (23%), Mecsek (21%), the Babás-szerkövek (14%) and the Zsongor-stone (13%). This shows that the rocky red sandstone formations of Jakab Hill are among those natural features that define the landscape. In response to the questions related to sights and attractions 26 different answers were given, the first 5 out of which were: hiking options (68%), appealing landscape (44%), panorama and village scape (36%), historic monuments (31%), and unique natural values (22%).

The empirical research showed the essentially positive attitude of locals towards tourism; however, they do not attribute great economic significance to it. As an exception, those working

in tourism and locals of Cserkút, where rural tourism flourishes, really feel the importance of tourism as an income opportunity. Cserkút is a very hospitable village, scores given to the statement »Tourists are generally nice, friendly and build a good relationship with locals« were very high. It was demonstrable that those who are more attached to their village have a more positive opinion about tourists and those involved in tourism and receiving economic benefits from it consider tourists friendlier (Table 1.). Inhabitants of the Western Mecsek area do not feel the negative social, cultural and natural effects of tourism yet, which indicates the sustainability and developmental potentials of the tourism of an area in its early phase of destination-life cycle (P. SPEIGLER 2011).

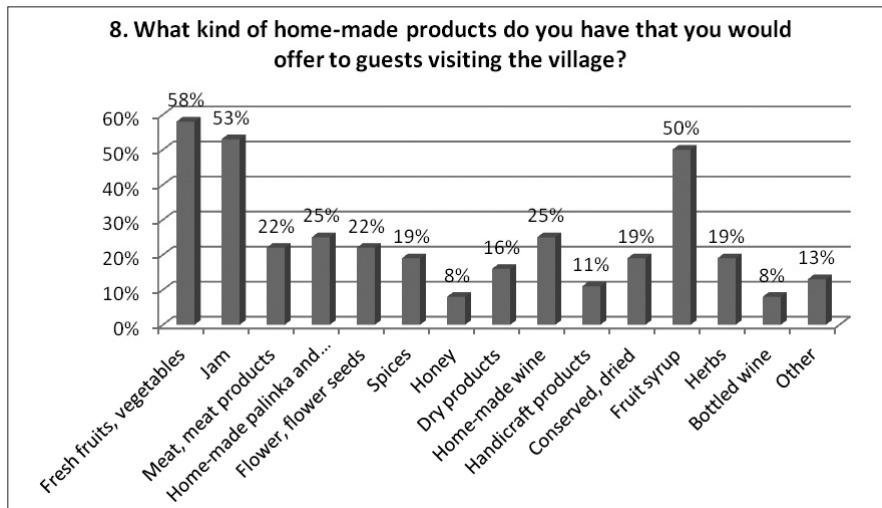
**Table 1.:** Diversity of locals' opinion about tourists in the examined villages on the basis of agreeing with certain statements (average according to a 1-5 scoring)

	Tourists are strangers here, they do not understand our customs and they disturb our everyday life.	Tourists endanger natural, social and cultural values of the area.	Tourists are generally nice, friendly and build a good relationship with locals.	Presence of tourists make life easier since they represent sources of income and possibilities of employment.
Bakonya	1,06	1,09	3,72	2,03
Boda	1,14	1,29	3,74	1,91
Cserkút	1,26	1,16	4,58	4,26
Kővágószőlős	1,39	1,48	3,63	3,33
Kővágótöttös	1,57	1,52	3,91	2,87
Not working in tourism	1,32	1,37	3,82	2,96
Working in tourism	1,1	1,2	4,3	4,2
Weak regional identity	1,48	1,5	3,48	3
Strong regional identity	1,27	1,32	3,93	3,02

The survey showed that respondents consider the situation of their area good regarding village scape, accessibility and hospitality. Neighbourhood hiking opportunities were given the highest scores by all. The fact, that on the basis of these aspects the receptivity of the destination is considered good by respondents show their positive attitude towards their own life circumstances. These are the points that represent the strength and appeal of the region. Locals are committed to protecting natural values, almost half of the respondents (n=109) attached significant importance to the issue while other 65 people believe that it is an important task. In contrast to this, local perceptions of local governments' commitment towards tourism, of commercial services, the preparedness and readiness of accommodations and cultural institutions varied greatly and hospitality services and entertainment facilities were also criticised. These are such critical points to which communities and those in charge should pay attention during developments. At the same time, it is worth adding that certain shortcomings root from the character of the rural area and are the features of rural tourism that is it's not the commercial services and entertainment facilities that attract visitors.

Significant number of respondents (16%, 36 people) plan to join hospitality. This rate is encouraging with respect to future developments in the area. Startup conditions of the development of local product production that is becoming more and more popular nowadays are good. The 36 respondents planning to join hospitality were addressed the following question: »What kind of home-made products do you have that you would offer to guests visiting the village?«. The answers were diverse; they portray diverse activities which can be seen below in *Figure 1*.

We believe that implementing ecotourism developments needs the support of locals, which is given in the Western Mecsek area according to our research.



**Figure 1.:** Diversity of answers to the question »What kind of home-made products do you have that you would offer to guests visiting the village?« amongst those planning to join hospitality in the Western Mecsek area

**2.2 The attitude of tourists towards ecotourism: findings of an empirical research undertaken in the South Transdanubian region**

In 2011, as part of a regional empirical research conducted by the ecotourism cluster, 294 questionnaires were filled by those engaging in ecotourism activities and using ecotourism services. The questionnaires, besides the traditional printed form were also available online. When designing the questionnaire and phrasing the actual questions, great emphasis was put on assessing the attitude of tourists towards ecotourism. Findings are worth to be taken into consideration during ecotourism developments in the area despite of the fact that since most respondents were ‘consumers’ of ecotourism services data collected indicate a more positive picture than a representative sample would probably have. The majority of respondents were young (60% below the age of 35) or middle aged (36% between the ages of 35-60) and had high educational level (67%). These demographic features are characteristic of the Hungarian ecotourists.

Within the framework of free association and open ended questions the survey examined the first five expressions that come to tourists’ mind about ecotourism. As it can be seen in Figure 2. most respondents connected the words ‘nature’, ‘green’, ‘forest’ and the expressions ‘environmental

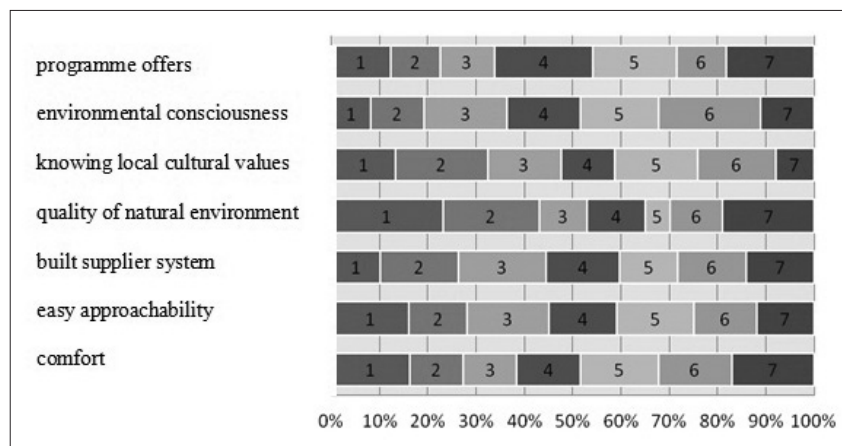


**Figure 2.:** Free association field of ecotourism in the mind of tourists (ed.: [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net) program) (Translation of the 15 most often mentioned words in connection with ecotourism: természet=nature, zöld=green, erdő=forest, fenntarthatóság=sustainability, környezetvédelem=environmental protection, környezettudatosság=environmental - consciousness, nyugalom=peace, kirándulás=hiking, természetvédelem=nature protection, levegő=air, túra=tour, környezet=environment, vidék=countryside, falu=village, pihenés=resting, állatok=animals)



and nature protection', 'environmental consciousness', 'sustainability' ..etc. with the concept of ecotourism and listed such touristic elements as 'hiking', 'quiet', 'peace', 'countryside', 'village'. This indicates that for tourists the notion of ecotourism means the protection of natural values and activities performed in the nature. The word ecotourism is entwined with nature and the colour green in the minds of tourists pushing understanding of cultural values and social environment into the background.

According to the survey 78% of respondents take into consideration the natural environment, its quality, diversity of landscape and tranquility when choosing a holiday destination. Among the main criteria of their choice are environmental consciousness, programme offers and comfort (Figure 3.). Regarding the quality of natural environment responses were divisive as it is visible in *Figure 3*: for many it is a main priority while others think it is the least important factor.



**Figure 3.:**the order of importance of respondents' expectations (1=least important, 7= most important factor)

Respondents like active tourism, almost 50% of them participates in hiking or cycling activities several times a year. 90% said that their travel was, to lesser or greater extent, pervaded by the 'spirit' of ecotourism but 41% of them haven't taken part in targeted ecotourism journeys yet. 35% of those who have participated in such tours were completely satisfied with the services but significant part of them (65%) would improve the quality of certain programmes and services.

The findings of this survey undertaken among tourists visiting the South Transdanubian region indicate that people's first thought about ecotourism is nature and not cultural or social values. As it was concluded by a national survey conducted by the Hungarian National Tourist Office in 2007 Hungarian ecotourists are motivated primarily by hiking opportunities, the beauty of natural environment, clean air and tranquility (HUNGARIAN NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE 2007). The regional survey showed a more positive personal attitude towards ecotourism and active free time activities than the national one but this attitude can not be seen as a convincingly positive one. Ecotourism service providers have to satisfy very differentiated demands and coordinate them, such as environmental consciousness, programmes, comfort, accessibility... etc.

### **2.3 Professional development of ecotourism suppliers: results of a cross-border co-operation, the »Pannon Tourism« project in the area of the River Drava**

The Pannon region refers to the flood fields of the River Drava along the Croatian-Hungarian border. This region is characterized by smaller villages. Territories along the River Drava are under the management of the Danube-Drava National Park on Hungarian side, and are also under nature protection on Croatian side. Characteristics of the Drava landscape were determined - besides natural

features - by the history of the region. Drava, as a border river divided Hungarian and Croatian territories which is interesting in the context of their situation as being disadvantaged and peripheral areas in their own countries. During the Cold War this area was a strictly guarded part of border between Hungary and the former Yugoslavia. This is the reason why there was no industry located here. Today this may bring advantages to the Drava area: untouched nature and quiet villages and hamlets serve as a perfect basis for rural- and ecotourism (G. SZABÓ – P. SPIEGLER 2009b).

Rural- and ecotourism are takeoff opportunities for economically weak border villages, not just in an economic sense (create jobs, generate income) but since their principles are in harmony with the concept of sustainable development they may play an important role in protecting local farms, landscape, nature, arts and crafts and also help preserve cultural diversity. At least three ethnic groups have always lived together in this border land: Hungarians, Croatians and Gypsies. These cultures affected one another and villages of mixed ethnic population emerged on both sides of the border (e.g.: Croat populated villages in Hungary: Dráwapiski, Drávasztára, Felsőszentmárton). Along the River Drava Ormánság is an integrated ethnographic land with special traditions, architecture, gastronomy, unique Presbyterian churches with boarded ceiling and the widely known tradition of having only one child (G. KISS 1986). As opposed to the decreasing number of Hungarian inhabitants as a result of the one-child family 'tradition' and economic difficulties, the size of the Gypsy population in the Drava area has grown in the last few years and today there are villages populated solely by Gypsies such as Alsószentmárton or Gilvánfa (K. KOCSIS – ZS. BOTTLIK 2009). There are numerous differences between the two sides of the border regarding culture and tradition, but tourism cooperation is obvious and desirable. The untouched natural environment and its community that preserves its historic past and traditional cross-border cooperation are extremely attractive for tourists visiting the Drava area.

Since the 1990's, numerous great projects have been implemented in the Drava area such as the PHARE project aiming at the development of tourism infrastructure, the Ancient Drava project within the framework of the ROP (Regional Operative Programme), aiming at the settlement of the ecological status of the River Drava area and the Dráva project aiming at the establishment of a tourism network of bicycle routes, walking paths, water routes and horse riding routes etc. However, the new infrastructure is not well utilized, due to lack of commitment and qualifications of locals and service providers. A cross-border cooperation programme, the »Pannon Tourism« INTERREG project was implemented in 2007 to eliminate this gap (G. SZABÓ – P. SPIEGLER. 2009b).

The share of rural tourism in the Pannon region is much smaller than it could be so improving competitiveness of rural hospitality enterprises is essential. One of the most important aspects of rural tourism development is the creation of supply of quality rural accommodation and local specialities (handicrafts, agricultural products, local produce and food). Developing the Drava area should be based upon the potentials that the area already has, in other words re-discovery and utilization of local natural, social, cultural values with the aspects of tourism in mind is necessary. This is why the »Pannon Tourism« project aimed to develop professional competence of hosts and promote values, traditions and programme opportunities of the region through creating and organising a cross-border region-specific training programme ([pannoniantourism.hu](http://pannoniantourism.hu)).

The result of the project is a newly developed Croatian-Hungarian joint curriculum for entrepreneurs both in a printed and electronic (CD) format, which fits the »European Curriculum for Training Rural Tourism« recommendation and contains 10 moduls: I. Tourism and recreation; II. Hospitality; III. Accomodation; IV. Food and Catering; V. Activities; VI. Nature, environment and local culture; VII. Marketing and promotion; VIII. Legislation; IX: Health and safety; X. Management. All moduls are available in Croatian and in Hungarian. 8 of them were made in Croatia while 2 (V. and VI) in Hungary. The sixth modul - Nature, environment and local culture – recite how tourism

of rural regions are organised according to their potentials. The modul mediates both practical and theoretical knowledge and thereby contains the basics of tourism, highlights marketing, management, programme marketing, hospitality and also touches upon catering, hygiene, the method of how to create rural hospitality facilities and the know-how of organising gastronomic programmes. One of the programmes' main goals is to lay down a basis for local knowledge so this is the reason why it deals with local potentials and the characteristics of the region. The mentioned sixth modul contains a curriculum about the natural values and protected areas, local history and topographical knowledge, the options of utilizing ethnographical and cultural heritage, and gastronomic traditions of the Drava basin. At the end of the modul a project plan should be prepared by participants as a preparation for practical application (G. SZABÓ – P. SPIEGLER 2009b).

Within the framework of »Pannon Tourism« project the elaborated moduls can serve as examples for training and preparing rural and ecotourism suppliers. Through these moduls tourism, based on the natural and cultural heritage of the Drava region, can be improved, which is extremely important in this disadvantaged area because realizing the region's values may strengthen the commitment and interest of locals towards creating rural and ecotourism facilities.

#### ***2.4 Cooperation for developing ecotourism in the region: the example of the ecotourism cluster***

One component of the strength of the South Transdanubian region is that quite a few leading stakeholders are committed to ecotourism. The Danube-Drava National Park, the national forestries operating in the region and a new initiative, the ecotourism cluster deserve highlighting.

The antecedent of the ecotourism cluster roots back to the »South Transdanubian Cooperation for Active Leisure Time and Environmental Education« with a decade-long history. In the beginnings, committed believers of environmental education and tourism started to coordinate their activities informally, building from the ground up and took concrete steps towards cooperation.

Following some common projects and coordinated marketing actions the »Gyeregyalog.hu Association« was founded at the beginning of 2009. Main goal of the association was to help the unity of action of individuals, organisations and suppliers –both profit oriented and non-profit – that are active in the region, popularise environmental-conscious behavior and natural values, have experience in open-air school education, show interest towards this theme and actively promote sustainable environmental development. The original aim was to make the South Transdanubian region the centre of environmental education and natural education. This goal was broadened when the process of cluster organisation started in the fall of 2009. Today, co-operating participants want to achieve the number 1 position of the South Transdanubian region as an ecotouristic destination in Hungary.

Most cluster members are market players so strengthening their own position is their main expectation. In the short run a new, up-to-date marketing activity may have the biggest affect to that so one of the first steps was to create a regional ecotourism marketing strategy. Within joint activity the emphasis is on joint marketing (online campaign, leaflets, creating a joint image, participating in exhibitions and festivals ...etc.). Besides effective market broadening marketing we should not forget product development the main direction of which is the creation of a system of major ecotourism programmes. The starting-point is to recognise that accomodation and board are not the most determining factors for an eco-conscious tourist but the promise of having a unique ecotourism experience. Besides static attractions ( eg. the beauty of a national park) visitor experience can be enhanced by appealing host of events related to ecotourism.

In their work the members of the South Transdanubian Ecotourism Cluster take the principles of sustainability (K: VARGÁNE CSABÁNE 2005) into consideration. This is proved by concrete practices:



- They created a database and publication of local producers and ecological farmers in order to promote them.
- Such an ecotourism qualifying system is getting established by which the predominance of sustainable development and its system of aspects will become an important part of evaluation.
- The Ecotourism Thematic Days and the system of major ecotourism programmes were created which will serve the needs of attitude forming related to sustainable development in the form of a year-long programme series.
- There will be a kind of knowledge store created on the website of the cluster. During its conferences, held annually, special emphasis will be given to promote different aspects of the topic by demonstrating the regional best practice.

Complex and regional thinking is a primary requirement in the 21st century when we are talking about tourism development. The South Transdanubian Ecotourism Cluster aspires consciously to this because this is the only way to synchronise the needs of cluster member suppliers, locals, communities and the activities serving the development of natural environment. The cluster management hopes that with 2-3 years' hard work the programme of magnificent weekend events and activities awaiting ecotourists in the region will become integral part of the image of the South-Transdanubian region. The goal is to make the rich active-, rural-, and ecotourism programme of events a notion connected to the region as bicycle tourism is in case of Lake Tisza.

## SUMMARY

Natural features and cultural heritage represent outstanding values in the South Transdanubian region –e.g.: Dráva basin, the Mecsek Mountains and protected values of the Zselic area –which serve as a perfect basis for developing ecotourism. However, ensuring a supplier background to utilise values of the area and to realise developments is necessary. For the sake of this in the last few years many projects and initiatives have emerged in the South-Transdanubian region. Cases reviewed in the study show that besides building the infrastructure and ensuring economic capital, forming positive attitude of locals towards ecotourism, understanding the ecotouristic needs and demands of visitors, creating a competent supplier behavior, preparing/training tourism service providers and the co-operation of ecotourism stakeholders are just as much necessary for successful developments.

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## SAŽETAK

Izuzetne prirodne ljepote možemo pronaći cijelom širom regijom Južnog Zadunavlja. Te prirodne ljepote su dobra ishodišna točka za razvoj eko-turizma. Prirodni rezervati u okviru Nacionalnog parka Dunav-Drava predstavljaju zanimljive atrakcije, čak i na međunarodnom planu. Rijeka Drava je jedna od tri najčišće europske rijeke, a geološke i morfološke osobine planine Mecsek i prirodnog rezervata Zselic su od izuzetnog značaja., nagrađeni titulom »Rezervat zvjezdanog neba«. Svi zainteresirani na mogućnosti eko-turizma gledaju kao na veliki i obećavajući, ali neiskorišten potencijal. No, osim prirodnih bogatstava, na razvoj eko-turizma veoma utječe stav lokalnih vlasti i ljudi, te posjetitelja, kao i profesionalnost pružatelja usluga eko-turizma i njihova spremnost na suradnju. Rezultati empirijskih istraživanja pojedinih oglednih primjera dobro pokazuju osnove, potencijale i moguće smjerove razvoja eko-turizma u području Južnog Zadunavlja.

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